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TAGS: PGOV PREL GG RU

SUBJECT: SAAKASHVILI DISMISSES ANTI-NATO DEBATE AND
NEUTRALITY

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) At a February 23 news conference, President Saakashvili dismissed as "foolish" the recent public debate over whether Georgia's NATO aspirations will prevent it from restoring territorial integrity over the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The debate began on February 16, when Traditionalist Party leader Akaki Asatiani stated on a popular TV show that the GOG should consider a policy of neutrality and abandon its NATO aspirations in order to receive unspecified "concessions" from Russia on the breakaway regions. Asatiani was referencing a February 6 call by Russian Ambassador Kovalenko, for Georgia to become a "neutral state."

¶2. (U) Senior ruling party MPs dismissed Asatiani's comments, calling them part of an "anti-NATO campaign" implemented by "marginalized Georgian political forces," and sponsored by the Kremlin. Givi Targamadze, chair of the defense and security committee in Parliament, said this campaign is designed to derail Georgia's NATO bid. He added the campaign is based on two false premises: that if Georgia were to give up its NATO bid, then Russia would "restore Georgia's territorial integrity over Abkhazia and South Ossetia," and that NATO integration would make it impossible for Georgia to regain the separatist territories. The National Movement called on all political parties to voice their positions on Georgia's NATO accession.

¶3. (C) During a series of meetings with Ambassador, senior opposition leaders including Salome Zourabichvili of Georgia's Way and David Usupashvili of the Republican Party -- who support NATO accession as a national priority -- said that although NATO integration remains popular among Georgians, the neutrality argument could have some traction if it were perceived to lead to the return of the territories, particularly Abkhazia. They underlined that the public consistently ranks restoring Georgia's territorial integrity as the number one GOG priority.

¶4. (C) Comment: Saakashvili's public dismissal of "trading Georgia's NATO aspirations for Russian concessions on the separatist regions," is a first step to the ongoing public information campaign about the benefits and responsibilities of NATO membership. We will encourage the GOG to follow this up with continued outreach efforts. The resonance this idea has in some sectors of the public indicates how important reclaiming the separatist territories remain in the minds of most Georgians. End Comment.

TEFFT